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# Lost to the world for several days

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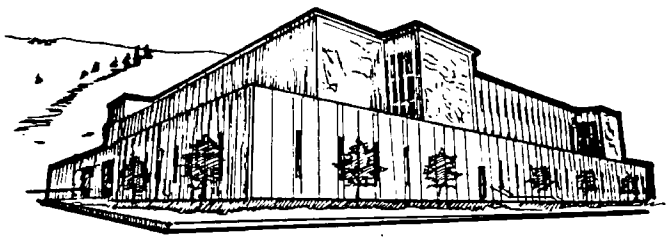

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University of
Montana

LOST TO THE WORLD FOR SEVERAL DAYS

By

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B.A., University of Washington, 1984

M.F.A., University of Montana, 1991

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1991

Approved by

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Dean, Graduate School

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LOST TO THE WORLD FOR SEVERAL DAYS

# Acknowledgements

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"Porch Lights"

To the memory of my father
Arthur L. Stearns, 1925-1990

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# Lost to the World for Several Days

First, it is lamplight. Then sugarcakes,
turpentine and solstice--the taste of words
of my tongue. Then it is meadow fog,
the whippoorwill's call in the morning.
Rivers and rain on days
I cannot remember the name of someone I love.
In the summer, sweet peas and steeped tea,
the silhouettes lovers leave
in the grass. Pine pitch when autumn comes,
when the resin of church pews reminds me
of my family's dead. For you, only your body:
blood, salt, water, bone. Not the sleepwalkers
or dreamers, not twilight or thimbles,
a childhood lost in blue Mason jars. "Come," you say,
"this is the place. Here is the window. Climb through."

FAITH IN SMALL THINGS

## Beginnings

I think of words like bottomfish
in a pond whose waters are murky and still.
And I think how we all go there
with our nets, our arms curved
to dip the surface
for what we must keep believing is there.
The first time I knew there was poetry, it was summer
and the neighbor's sprinkler was on, slapping
rhododendron bushes, leaving rivers in the dry grass.
My mother had canned that evening
and the smell of raspberries drifted
through the screen door, over the windowsills
where moths fluttered then stilled.
She had found an arrowhead that afternoon
in the garden, and told me an Indian village
was sleeping under the pole beans, rhubarb and squash.
Barefoot and alone, I wandered out there,
stomped a drumbeat
for the girl who died clutching a reedpipe,
for the old woman in the doorway stringing beads,
for the pony kicking dust devils in the field.

## Sleeping Sickness

They've kept his overalls on a nail
in the back bedroom, his fishing pole on the porch.
They believe he lies in the hammock
between the willows, a blade of grass at his lips.
Not family, I see him near death
in the backwater shack, his pallet sheets soaked
with the heat of his body. His family croons
Emmett or Earl, a name he shares
with his daddy or grandaddy, a name
that rolls off their tongues like a lullaby.
I envy the intimacy of their sorrow, history
of stillborns and drownings.
No one in his family knows
to blame mosquitos, thick all week
in the places he played. Had I been there
when his body first quivered,
I would have grasped his shoulders
and insisted he wake up.
Like a dowser who finds water, I expect someday
to move paperweights without touching them,
make radios snap on.
When my father died, I said I would give up
writing to bring him back, and for awhile,
I believed resurrection could happen.
What sacrifice would this boy's family give?
What holds us here must hold others.

Signals

When we were thirteen
we lived by signals.
Yours, a ragdoll
slung over your father's
porch rail; mine, slow
steps across the field
between our houses,
skeletons of ice
crunching
under my boots.
When he wasn't there,
I could feel
the hands that pulled
the blue plate
from the oven,
the lips that scowled
at the chicken
in cream sauce,
peas boiled to mush.

I thought
you were indifferent.
You didn't care
about dances
or black fishnet stockings.
You didn't want dimestore lipsticks
dropped like coins
on your bed.
When he said
he wanted to be
first, when he
called you night
after night
into his dim bedroom,
pulled back the sheets
and commanded you to lie
down--what were you
thinking? The only
world I knew
was my parents'
fenced acre, the house
built from a blueprint:
four children, Sunday school,
picnics in the meadow.

By summer, you told me
and I told no one,
afraid he might press
a knife to my throat.
What I wrote into my white diary

those nights was this:
Today Father mowed the lawn.
Mother finished her canning.

Faith in Small Things

A man stands inside a burning room.
This room part of his house,
this house part of a neighborhood
where all houses are the same,
all driveways circular,
surrounded by neatly clipped lawns.
Typical afternoons, he remembers
the lathered smell of horses,
the rasp of grain down
the silo shoot on his grandfather's farm.
But this afternoon is different.
Smoke is clouding his lungs.

Twelve paces to the window,
a sprained wrist or ankle
to the cool grass below.
And though parts
of his life are missing:
the salmon sunsets he meant
to witness in Africa,
the baked puzzle pieces
he hoped to sketch into a book,
he cannot jump,
bring back the wife
who left him, her black
silk slippers mocking his
in the closet, all these years.

As a child, he was told
the body is comprised of components:
a husk, his grandmother said,
and spirit, the essence
of what the chalky-breathed woman
and all his dead relatives,
even his wife, have become.
He divides himself.
One part spirit,
one part husk--the man
he really is,
already dead on the floor.

## Tadpoles and Fractions

Not a hairpin curve or ice-glazed berm,
not hail on the windshield
or lightning in the mirror,
but a pencil-straight road in September,
and you all alone on the sidewalk
in front of the elementary school,
thinking about tadpoles and fractions.

The Harper boy said he didn't see you,
flooring his '63 Chevy for the gravel
climb up Finn Hill, bored
with autumn's bright processional
of scarlet and sienna,
bored with his sister's nightly novenas
and mother's pleadings
that he stay away from those tarpaper
shacks where boys smeared chamois
cloths over pounded out fenders
and took hard swallows
of their father's watered down
whiskey and rum. Only the bulldog
on his hood and Saint Christopher
on the dash witnessed his falling.

Mr. Larson, the patrol monitor
told me you were dead. I watched him
cover you with his gray coat until
the only thing left was your blood
and the skid marks veering
like an equation that never makes sense.
I stood with the other children
in a circle, our bodies
as motionless as the pool
of afternoon light that bound us,
until our mothers came,
tapping our shoulders and saying
our names just to make sure.
My mother said my name twice
and we held hands tight
as we walked down the road,
past the turnoff to your house,
past the stream where we all knelt
at some time or other to catch
tadpoles darting through quicksilver
water, and a person knew to swerve
fast with their hand or risk
having to stand up and swear in front
of everyone that you didn't see anything at all.

## Next Time

I will say miracle, not hoax
to the crutches and leg braces
hung like a lacemaker's giant implements
on the walls of Saint Anne's by the Sea.
I will believe that the comet's tail
brings every gazer good luck
and that the stone house
I was raised in had its own reasons.
I will tell of the patio
that glistened like an ice rink
after rain, when I was a child
collecting teaspoons of soil in jars.
I will find the summer afternoons
when I sat in front of my grandmother's
screen door, breathing in the musk
of wet tomato plants and newspapers
stacked on her porch.
I will remember standing
alone in front of a mechanic's garage window
in Poulsbo only to discover the community
orchestra practicing
among flywheels and turpentine rags.
Beethoven and Strauss reached me
through the moon cresting
the cemetery, the wooden staircase
climbing the hill.
I will understand my winter in Vermont,
alone, until a stranger scribbled a map
on a matchcover and told me to drive home.
Finally, I will trust my silhouette,
that side of me that slips every night
away from my body to lie
like a crumpled black nightgown on the floor.

## Gooseberries

Late afternoons when I walk
my garden, the only globes I find
are last month's gooseberries
tinged by sun. A boy dragging
a stick walks by and waves.
Something in the arc of his arm
reminds me of the white-bearded men
who gestured each night from windswept
terraces, the tablets and telescopes
that plotted bright constellations in the sky.
The heavens they mapped
were no less ancient than the one
behind today's pale blue eggshell sky
or the one I discovered then journeyed
back from--knighted, long summer evenings
of my boyhood. The only knowledge
I owned then was desire,
a compass in the palm.
What was it about that sky,
the pinpoint stars
that made me long for other planets,
to rise from my bed and stand
barefoot in deep grass?
Was it my parents' voices rising
like moondust, the sad jars of limpets
and sand? Now the fear of ice age
and dust bowls, now the earth's plates
shifting beneath my feet.
I could hand that child some wisdom,
call him to say this world is blown glass,
a fireball twirling on the end of a stick.
But there is this gooseberry split
in my fingers, this lunar soil
I stand on, where nothing planted
this season will grow.

## The Cartographer

While other boys collected cat-eye marbles
and baseball cards into shoeboxes,
you wandered old bookstores for maps
rolled into spools, dusty as cracked book spines.
Leaning against the glass counter,
you smiled at the sullen-faced clerk
counting each nickel into the till.
Your favorite maps had no interstates
or secondary roads, instead the brushstroke of emerald,
turquoise and gold, schooner trails
crisscrossing oceans, legends
of Persia, the Aleutian Islands,
the Dead Sea. Place names you recited
as you tied each map with twine
to your bike fender for the slow ride home.

You thumbtacked them on your bedroom wall,
the night light burning, on the bedstand
a picture of your father, dead three years.
And you wondered at this world's
meticulous details: your mother downstairs
moving through rose colored light,
her thin hands folding linens
into dark drawers smelling of parsley
and carved soap. This you vowed,
was your purest vocation:
to gaze for unblinking hours into jagged
mountains, inlets no bigger
than your fingernail tracing parchment,
the paintbrush's path as it shaded
in the bordered space of the smallest,
most remarkable things.

Barn Swallows

Surrounded by birch trees and sugar maples,
ghosts of appaloosas nickering hay
and cows with milk-white eyes, that barn
rose on the slow, uneven hill
of my childhood--a cobwebbed house
inhabited by barn swallows, a family who sang
all their words. Skittering in and out
of two carved crescent moons, those birds
knew the ribs of rafters and corners
where whispered dreams lay still.

Neighbor boys took the Bunnell girl there--
her toothless grin as she ambled barefoot
up nails laddering a beam of pocketknifed wood.
Mother warned my sisters and me away,
but we wedged a wide circle on Sundays after church,
eager to exchange our pale pinks and patent leathers
for wind dried jeans, mud boots from Montgomery Wards.
Lured by the windvane's spinning, we splattered
plums onto gray wood split by rain.
When only the dark stains answered,

we pulled open the door and entered single file
through flourdust light, sifting the musk
of mildew and damp cotton: handkerchiefs crumpled
to hay, the snagged hem of calico and gingham.
Dangling our legs from the loft, we spoke of skeleton keys
and the idiot boy who lived two pastures over
with his mother who always jumbled our names.
And the white light the Widow Cooper followed,
calling it her will o' wisp, telling us it vanished
ice cold into the floorboards
the morning we found her kneeling,
her flannel nightgown trailing bare linoleum.

Someday, my older sister said, I will live
in a mansion, and she described butlers
toting biscuits, the crepe paper lanterns
strung beside a pool where shooting stars
glistened and fell. My little sister and I
nodded, twining a bracelet of straw.
When hunger came, we bit into bitter apples.
Twisted the stems to an alphabet of boys
bent over polished chrome and engines.

The birds have it right, my older sister said,
they can always go. We knew the secret places
she meant: Lapland, the mud-baked Congo, everywhere
Father's glossy National Geographic took him
night after night under the front room's dim glow.

When we stumbled into the night air,
there was a new order to everything,
dinner plates being carried from cupboards to counters,
the electric fence buzzing,
and the Bunnell girl lying on her bed, staring
at the bluebell wallpaper suddenly grown old.

Legacy

My grandmother's uncle wanted her,
the way he had wanted all of her sisters,
their bodies pinned to the kitchen's pine table,
the tablecloth puckered into fists.
A bowl of unshelled peas or sliced beets
shattered each time to the floor.
With her, he tried in the barn,
a corner beside the corn crib
where she bent counting eggs.
"I have to have it," he said,
saying he had taken each of her sisters.
My grandmother lifted a hatchet
like a lantern or torch, told him if he stepped closer
she would drive the blade through his skull.
"An uncle," she kept telling me, crying
when she remembered the years it took
to tell her father, how she and her sisters
never discussed it at all.
Why couldn't they speak,
when one of them came to the others
at the clothesline or chicken coop,
when their eyes looked down or away?
Now, my grandmother and her sisters are dead,
and I do not know how to speak with my mouth of wood.

Trains

Those times he spoke of trains,
my father's memory never failed him,
always the Southern Pacific,
Enid, Oklahoma, 1932.
Afternoons, he placed pennies on the track
while the 4:07 rolled east out of Tulsa,
plumes of black smoke against all that red dirt.
That was the year his father's brain tumored,
and my father's face and name were lost
with cousins and uncles, the doctors
who wound bandages on his father's skull.
When fever set in, he walked the station,
dreamed of riding in the blue haze of smoking cars
or better yet, living with the men
who cooked rabbits over coals
and slept under trestles,
who had been to Chicago and New York,
Duluth and Saint Paul.
My father said he would've paid money to be like them,
to carry all he owned in a tablecloth
pulled from a clothesline, his pocketknife and stopwatch,
the purple heart his father won in the war.
Instead he wore a blue uniform,
thirty years on the police force,
my mother always afraid.
I wanted him to ride before he died,
to send postcards of factories and steamers,
those cities he thought he could love.
Instead he left a half-finished crossword,
a time table to destinations I've not heard of,
in countries I don't know.

## Light Years Away, My Father Gathers Stones In His Garden

Nightfall pulls over
my father's land
like a drawn shade.
There is no way he can know,
pushing his wheelbarrow
into the tin shed
that this night
will happen,
that four hours
after supper
the moon will appear
like a sickle
in the window
and he will lie
face down on
the dining room floor
and die.
My mother, swirling
a dishrag over
sealed jars
cannot know, nor can
her children,
folding damp clothes
in their houses.
She will phone each of them
and say, "I thought
he was sleeping."

If my father had known,
he would have gathered gifts
and left them
in conspicuous places:
a bushel of Indian corn
on the porch steps--
in his pockets, pill
bottles of seeds
from the red poppies
that bloomed decades
ago along the front fence.
Or he would have brought us
the night lightning
stormed our windows
and he cooked cocoa
for us in his woodshop,
told stories
we had not heard
before or since.

But he cannot know.
And I cannot know

when I lie down
and can't sleep
that this is the night
marking all of my darkness
and his sudden, beautiful end.

LATELY THE CURVE OF MY LIFE

Those Years

It wasn't earthquakes or tornadoes
but my father's job that scared me,
phone calls that broke the night's silence,
that pounded like a nightstick
against the windows of our house.
It was the blue uniform Mother pressed
on Sundays, while Cronkite said Watts and Kent State.
It was the creak of black shoes and gunbelt
as he walked past my bedroom, knowing
in the city he would be called pig, narc and the fuzz.
The father who returned would be someone else's,
would say how much he'd loved my father,
promise twenty-one guns at dusk.
Mother worried too and told me "Say insurance,
never policeman, even among friends."
But I did, because there was that part
of me that thought hero,
wanted them to know his life
was in danger and might end
on the local news, Mother cradling a photo or flag.
I'd learn to say honor and duty,
ignore the lips that snickered
when I cried. But the demonstrations stopped
and the phone stayed quiet all night.
Thirty years in, my father retired,
said he wasn't sorry but would never go back.
I wanted to say I was happy.
I wanted to tell him I lay awake
those nights and worried he'd die,
but I didn't because I saw him
cry with one of his cronies
and knew, for the first time,
he had a life apart from us that was ending.

Night Birds

The work of their beaks is delicate,
almost too beautiful for straw and slivers of grass.
I lie awake and listen--a kind of Braille tapping
against the eaves. If my lover were here,
he would offer them a place on the quilt.
"Come here," he would say, "close your eyes and rest."
But my lover is gone and the birds
will not sleep in this room.
I close my eyes and remember the first starling
I found dead, its eyes open like droplets of blood.

Passage

The white enamel cupboard in my parents' garage
glistened like an iron lung.
I stood in front of it the September I turned thirteen
and decided life depended on passion,
as I had once decided
that breaking my leg or becoming an orphan
would bring pity from the shy dark-eyed boy down the street.
I stood in front of it because its dusty shelves
held glass: Mason jars of floating peaches and pears--
a testimonial to my parents'labors,
to all my father tended with his safe hands--
and bottles, seagreens with funnelled necks
that felt cool, indifferent to the chemistry of root beer,
the rewards of waiting. Where the brown river
had spilled I found tiny sugared beads.
They were sweet on my tongue.
In the kitchen, my mother waited, worried her iron
over the starched dresses my legs and arms had outgrown.
"Not this week," she'd say, "I'll open a bottle next week,
"I promise." While I waited for one of those next weeks,
a girl from school died swallowing a cloud of siphoned gas.
Had she lived, I might have asked her
what near-death tasted like, if she saw her ghost dance
like a lace slip in the wind.
I might have broken a bottle
for the sake of splintered worlds,
the air I didn't know I was learning to breathe.

## Lately the Curve of My Life

has begun to resemble
an hourglass. Each fragile bend
remembers how easily fire starts
with a mirror, a twig and the sun.
I still touch the things
I am warned not to touch
because I want to be sure.
Here is the farmer I photographed
threshing wheat in Alberta,
his house a white block against the sky.
Here, the blood from a childhood vulture,
the broken wing my brother lifted
with a stick and told me to touch.
Here are the seven years I spent
tilling and tilling the meticulous
stones of my marriage, here
the night my father died on the floor,
and I learned what it was to be
two states away and alone.
Here are the phone calls across
wet corn fields and the spines of mountains,
my sisters calling, old lovers calling.
Here, my friend's blood,
the Christmas night he decided his life was wrong.

## The House On Coal Creek

When the sun set, the windows
in our house caught fire.
I walked from room to room
as if tethered, as if touching
surfaces would ignite the whole house.
The field outside was a sea of green blades.
I walked out there.
When I had gone a long way I looked back.
You stood on the patio,
your face turned skyward.
You hadn't noticed I'd left.
I wanted to call you but couldn't.
When I opened my mouth, the wind slapped
my body. An electrical storm flashed in the hills,
making skeletons of the trees.
I closed my eyes and our lives floated past.
Night fell, my body grew tired
and the windows went black.
You turned the lights on in the house.
I followed them to the screen door.
Someone who looked like me
was writing her name in spilled sugar.
She was so hopeful.
All I could do was watch.

Intruder

Like sleeping ghosts our nightgowns lay
on the blankets turned down for our late return.
While Mom blotted her lipstick to tissue,
Dad turned the living lamp on low.
My sisters and I helped, drawing the curtains halfway.
At our grandparents' house, we played yahtzee,
watched blue collar workers swinging their lunchboxes
like lanterns through the night.
Riding home between my sleeping sisters
I always felt safe. But once,
we arrived to our front door wide open.
Dad called out while Mom and my sisters and I waited
in the car. Whoever it was, Dad said, left bootprints
bigger than his own in the flowerbed dirt,
but fled without as much as a spoon.
I cried as we walked under the moon's spotlight.
It was as though each room in our house
had been damaged by fire or flood.
Not even my nightgown or body,
nothing belonged to me anymore.

Kansas Wheat Country

Out here, we could drive forever
without a map, the fireflies burning
like stars. Prairie rolls to farms
and to wheat, the stone houses--legends
that landmarks become. We are still new
in our marriage, wise to hold hands
as we drive past your grandparents' gate,
the lawn chairs pulled to deep shade.
After sleep, your grandparents will beckon us
to coffee and rolls, ask for snapshots
of my white dress, a petal from the carnation
we unpinned from your tuxedo and left to last
at home in the freezer.

What will we tell them?
Our moments already so sudden,
so unsure in the borders our generation travels
that I cannot wish anything to last
past the prediction of wind.
I will reach for the fold of your sleeve,
the crook of the arm I shape to,
night after night, already knowing
lost faith never returns. Years will go by
and then our marriage will end. It will be
your grandparents' photos I examine
under lamplight, their faces that journey
to my dark kitchen table each anniversary,
bearing a white cake, a hundred white candles.

## The Spinster considers the Fall Harvest Moon

Tonight's moon has the ripeness of a yellow egg-plum,
the perfect circle of an embroidery hoop.
I stand before the bay window,
hoping to always know this brooch bright glow,
this gathering in my garden:
Bluebells, Cockleburrs, Queen Anne's Lace.
Where does the moon go after white petticoats
and lawn parties, after the patter of bathhouse
showers, our skin, the delicate blush
of pink frosting on teacakes?
Does she haunt the scavenger hunts
under willows or keep awake the men
who once were boys oblivious
to our locked arms and blood finger rituals?
She is persistent as Tuberose,
a white root I slice into crescents
then carry to the dark humus of my greenhouse.

Uncle Cyrus showed me the moonfrost on cornstalks,
taught me to know the rainwater smell of raked leaves.
The stone house he lived in had oilcloth curtains,
the whir of my mother's treadle
as she mended his trousers on Sundays.
Last month when the summer sky slid away,
I thought of Cyrus plotting the moon,
the musty smell as he opened the attic
trapdoor to toss goosedown quilts to me.
He called the moon Lucinda Angele
the twin who lay still with me in the trundle
while I listened to Mother and Father
playing whist, and Cyrus'arthritic hands
falling again and again on the ivory keys of the spinet.

Now, early evenings my neighbor visits.
We sit on the porch, talk of his beehouses,
my quinceberry jelly. After he leaves
I walk through each room,
winding the music boxes, thinking of lightning
bugs straining their way through nets
tied over the primrose in a white winter garden.

Aunt Juanita Lee

Your baby book christens you
to an era of porcelain dolls
and pink ribbons--an antique
girlhood ending abruptly in the darkest
limbs of my family tree.
It was pneumonia that took you,
rising like well water
in your tiny lungs when you were six,
but I am selfish, and won't let you
lie there naptime still in your eyelet frock
while crickets sing and fireflies glow
caught inside cheesecloth nets pulled
across the dusky back lawn.

Once, my mother confessed crying over
your bottle-thick eyeglasses
and the velvet leaf funeral corsage
she found buried in the bottom of Grandmother's trunk.
Now, Grandmother's gone, and those tokens
are the only clues we have to you,
and the spellbound year she spent
beside windows, listening
to your schoolmates Naomi and Madeline
push their wicker buggies through shade.
You are safe with me, and your life
still matters, the small voice calling
me through twilight
to cover my eyes and try and find you
from a long way.

Flannel Nightgowns

They reminded Mother of mustard packs,
a way to keep her daughters' safe.
How lovely she said we looked Christmas morning,
three marionettes--the fabric crisp as rosettes
against our soap-white skin. We wore them for her
long past threadbare, past elbow patches
and bunkbeds, the nightlight down the hall.
Now when she digs deep in the ragbag,
when she swirls lemon oil on the shadowbox,
does she recognize our history, all the ways
we had to learn to keep this body warm?

Mr. Wilsey

Wrinkled as an apple doll, old man
Wilsey lived on the top of Finn Hill,
closer to the Big Dipper and Milky Way
than the nearest neighbor's pasture.
His farm, a grove of cottonwoods,
a barnyard where Canada geese
molted behind chicken coop cages.
Father bartered Wilsey for tractor parts on Saturdays
while I fidgeted in the truck,
imagined what it would be like to wander
the old man's kitchen, to run
my fingers over the rows of peach preserves,
the cracked mugs topped late nights
with hotplate coffee and old stories.
Only three witch widgets to listen,
a homemade gift from his sister.

Maybe the other kids were right
when they called him a dowser,
said he could, blindfolded, lead us
to backwater swamps, murky ponds where rafts
sank among skunk cabbage and salal.
And maybe I was confused the time
I called them liars, shouted
he was lonely, needed to tell tall tales
before he sliced the August-plump melons,
jack-o-lanterns every October.

My father called Wilsey a teacher,
said I could learn from him as I did
from my grandparents and great aunts.
But what of the dark afternoon
I rode my bicycle to his house
and found him mumbling to his tractors,
the tobacco drool like grasshopper
spit on his chin, the wicker rocker
on the porch dappled in shadows?
A long time passed before he said
he had something for me. I hoped
for a buffalo head nickel, not the chestnut
he handed me, not the gift I'm not to open,
but keep under my pillow and wish on
every night for luck.

Survivor

When you recall the old man
with the hook arm
who spent twelve years
in a sanitorium, remember the hours
he tended tomatoes. Remember
the trowel he used to break
hard earth, the ditches
that came of his efforts,
four shallow graves filled with rain.
Remember the sack
heavy as drowned kittens,
how your mother pulled you inside
the gate and said, "no."
It's all right that no one
in your family would discuss
the trucks that carted families
like cattle through the streets.
It's all right that none of them believed
he belonged. You didn't
imagine moonlight glinted
the metal beneath his torn sleeve
or that he attempted to earn money
cleaning windows with milky water and rags.
You did see him break ice
months later, hold a shard
to his face and draw blood.

My Grandfather Visits

His coffined skin reminds me
of pie dough. You're dead, I say,
stop tapping your cane along
the white picket fence of my
childhood--all those bluebells
and poppies, the picnics we
had in the meadow out back.
I have a story, he says.
I already know, the time
you danced with my grandmother
in the dim parlor after
poker: Miller and Dorsey,
her diamond ring sold that night
for your one bad roll. Sorry,
he says, about all of that.
Oh, I have it down, I say,
the gypsy fortune teller's
prediction, the time you showed
up whiskey-drunk on Grandma's
stoop. And what were you thinking,
all those dark molasses haired
Hungarian sisters
clucking behind the curtain.
Still, I say, I am always
looking for men just like you,
your broken-back wish to die
with your boots on.
Grandmother cried till the end
for you. She used to grasp
my hand like an old dishrag,
say, I want to be with Pop.
He was such a good, good man.

Naming an End in Winter

This story bleeds red
and smells of rain clouds,
storms rattling root cellar doors,
my grandmother's grandmother dying
in a field tent outside Billings, a skeleton sipping
onion broth, the only meal
my grandmother could scrounge
then spoon through broken teeth.
I promised her I'd tell it
in a book and to my daughters,
tell of its end in winter
with frozen skirts and frost clinging
the sugar beets like glitter,
with a pine coffin and four candles, burning.
I wanted to know the other field hands were singing,
mourning doves outside the landowner's window,
wanted to know faith brought Spring's
blue crocus, a break in pond ice,
but it was late,
my grandmother's eyes closed,
already gone the long way back without me.

## The Dying Man Visits My Grandfather

The night
the dying man died,
he appeared beside
my grandfather's wrought-iron bed
in his street clothes
and told him goodbye.
Grandfather said
this occurrence made him realize
that there is a world
between the one
we walk around in
and the one we dream up.
That night, my grandfather
had been dreaming
of wild horses eating
oats from his hands.
"A good dream" he said,
"but not very sensible
for an old man."

Tonight, chilled
by night air,
I know I won't dream.
I am thinking
of my grandfather
those last few weeks.
I was thirteen
and the hospital
room was white and gleaming.
Each visit, I watched
him curl like a strange
animal under the sheets.
Each visit I waited
for him to speak.
When he did, his only words
were "Goodbye, kid."

Oklahoma Blood

The clapboard house was white. He does not say
much else. I imagine the screened porch,
cool cellar steps and crocks of apple butter
he dipped his fingers into. If my father
died tonight, I would want his spirit
to return to El Reno, find the year
that was good to corn and the little song of rain.

## Porch Lights

At dusk, in unmapped towns,
they are all we hope for,
painting white across cracked
porches where rusted milkcans
gather moss and rain-split doors
lock tight against wind.

Farmhouse porch lights blaze
like beacons over rain-damp
fields of wheat and stone.
We bear their burning
like a sadness set out to sun,
a curled spoon left in the paint
chipped drawer of our first house
to say, "We loved here once."

For years they whisper "Welcome"
in aster beds gone to seed,
lawns waist high in weeds.
Only long driveways stop us,
dark as night sky's clouded path,
the road we can't follow or blame.

## Canoeing the Blackfoot

This is where our long mile ends.
In our wake, we leave black islands,

keyhole inlets, those cool dark
places where I take my heart.

You are silent beside me,
as still as the river trees.

When we speak again, no words
will matter as much as woods

and rain, the trail of quiet leaves
that brought us here through heavy

mist. If I could say
I loved once, but am afraid

would you listen, show me how
to trust my life to water?

# GIVING THE DARKNESS SHAPE

Sleepers on the Train

I envy their sleeping, the hammock-like ease
of bodies to headrests and cushions, shoulders
against shoulders, mouths open.
When the ticket taker pulls the boarding
passes from lapels and curled fingers,
are the sleepers dreaming of childhood?
The apricot smell of August, milkboxes
and closed porches--towns whose called out names
they barely remember: Stillwater, Rosebud, Shenandoah.
Or are they remembering the time
they carried their blankets to deep meadows,
waiting for ghosts and comets?

Old lover, if you were here and awake would you stir them?
Make them blink to see that red combine
on the end of the pasture, the water tower
as round as a hatbox? Would they think
the waking world less beautiful, less real?
Once I watched you pretend sleep,
your eyelids closed like drawn curtains,
breath soft as milkweed in wind.
You were suprised when I asked you
where we were traveling and why.
Surprised when I said I was tired
of nightfall, everywhere
stars colliding in darkness.

All I Can See

of that night in Pulhusk
is a midnight-blue sky
and a boy.  His good ear
turned to the weathervane's whirring,
he walks outside to mimic the spin
with his body, before stumbling
like a crippled goat in the grass.
How odd it must have been to watch
the stars fall,
knowing nobody was there
to pull him like a drowned person
from the river of smoking grass at his feet.

Tonight, I want to believe disasters
are fabrications, like death's small door
or the rings of light around the body.
But I know I am wrong.
Sarajevo, Chernobyl.
My grandmother spoke to me out of her stroke
after months of babble:  "Do not be sad when I die."
I imagine a room where our parents still hold us,
call us their children and safe.

## Giving the Darkness Shape

Towards nightfall, the cancer comes
for Grandfather's blood, his bones,
his face. Each hour, the nurses
turn his bedsored body toward
the sleep of white lilies, carnation
wreaths from Grandmother's church.
Grandfather is curled too tight
for a wheelchair, a ride down the hall.
He does not recognize my sister or me,
standing beside his bed like small angels.
"Rise," we want to say, "chatter
to us in mock Chinese, tell us
your headhunter stories, how you swam
back to the ship's belly in a rain of spears."

Our parents do not speak. This vigil
kept so long by the bedside,
in the dark lobby, all night next to the phone.
"If he knew it was cancer," Grandmother says,
he would jump out the window. "Your Uncle Clem,
Aunt Noreen and Pearl all dead." We drive back
to our grandparents' house, to Grandfather's
razor propped in the glass, his ribbed undershirts
draped on the drying rack in the tub.
"Pop won't die," Grandmother says, stirring
and stirring a deep crock of apricots on the stove.

My sister and I do not have any words.
Only the crude crosses for distempered kittens,
a banty who wandered the road.
Our parents sit on the sofa and watch the late news.
I carry the deck of cards to them.
Someone shuffles and the whole house stills.

Dream Steps

The Dream Step pumps Mother gave us
were white. My sisters and I took
turns wearing them during dress-up,
those summer evenings we pulled down
the chiffon nightgowns that hung like ghosts
in her closet. They were part of the secret
life she shared with our father.
Over our jeans and t-shirts, the fabric
shimmered midnight-blue, seashell pink.
We were asleep but dancing in our bodies,
into the backyard darkness;
we were pinwheels twirling
past windtorn rosebushes,
the petals that spilled
like bottles of perfume
at our feet. Always, I tried
to imagine the tender faces of lovers.
My mother knew this,
the time she called me onto the porch
to tell the story of my father,
how he proposed to her by telegram,
a promise to make real their dream
of ten children. In my room that night
I pretended the sugar water
I sipped was champagne. I opened
the box of my mother's velvet bows
and listened for the sound of their love.
Bedsprings whispered until he rose
to splash water on his face.
Then, sudden stillness,
each slow breath they lost
climbing the ladder of sleep.

Scarlet Fever

The black cross on the window
barred you from the world for months,
and all you could do was lie there,
accept this sickness as a fist on your heart.
Your mother sheltered you, her limp ragdoll,
in stargazer quilts. Your voice trembled
in the upstairs bedroom, "Mother, I am so hot.
These bedsheets are burning." She daubed cold rags
on your forehead, listened for your breathing
as she tiptoed the stairwell again and again.
One day she brought you to the cot beyond the kitchen,
propped among the cobwebbed jars of dark peaches, pears.
All those hours the radio droned the Depression,
you worried for the coffee tin of coins,
the lame bundles of string.
When the sickness finally left,
you asked for summer, and your mother
walked you to the window, opened
to a blaze of red poppies, iris and plums.

Night Spirits

Call the seers what you will
but I too witnessed one of those small lights
said to hover marshy swamps and fields.
It happened in my childhood bedroom
where I lay in the darkness of a scolding,
all I owned or wanted
imagined stuffed into a pillowcase
and pushed past the hoarfrost rings
that slept all winter on the window.
At first, I thought it light left over
from the bedside lamp
or worse, my eyes blinded finally
by the furnace flame my mother warned me from,
but when I turned the light on it disappeared
and all that breathed was my opened book
like a giant moth beside the heater.
When I turned the light off again it reappeared
and began to bounce as if teasing--
a bobber on a fishing line above my head.
I felt no fear
and I never thought to ask or tell,
but I've wondered since what it meant.
Perhaps near death I'll know
why there are mysteries textbooks can't explain away,
secret families that mean to love us
even though they have disappeared.

## The Tombstone Carver's House

If the dead's names or dates were there
I don't remember, only the slabs
stacked like bricks behind Mr. Henry's shed.
Grays and blacks, dotted with flecks
that looked like sugar clumps
and felt as rough. After supper,
my sisters and I took dares to run his pasture,
to press our palms to the stones and count to ten.
Don't be afraid, I'd chant,
my white breath, a winding cloth for dolls.
If lights flicked on we knew we'd lost.
I lost once, his wife, thin with cancer
at the window, her face a cold cream mask,
the kind our mother scooped from jars.
We held each other's gaze, mine dark with shame
and hers--a look I'd never seen before.
Hate or fear or maybe sorrow,
so I looked away to find the shedded snakeskins
I knew were near and my fingers went numb
as wet flesh will when touched to ice.
Still no locks unclicked or screen doors swung
and Mr. Henry didn't appear,
a hand of cards or bottle raised.
I'd heard of the son he switched,
imagined the belt looping air,
and I think I almost wanted that or at least a shaking,
not his wife too sick to care
and the lights clicked off
and me alone to witness what near-death does,
its bearers turned to ghosts,
past worry over tipped feeders and toppled cans.
And I never heard a word about it,
not from them or my parents, not my sisters
who stood beyond and called me home,
voices from somewhere in the dark.

Fruit Trees

The autumn of my father's heart attack,
the fruit hung heavy in his orchard.
Mother said there was not time to harvest.
In the hospital, she used the word death,
told us the orchard would have to be sold.
We knew our father best by those trees,
by the blackboard instructions he left every morning:
Girls pick apples. Deliver to neighbors.
We grumbled to the wheelbarrow
and musty boxes in the shed,
their Yakima Valley and Skagit Mudflats
labels peeling in the damp air.

I don't remember the words
we whispered at his bedside,
but after that he seemed able
to leave us--a dust cloud disappearing
beyond the kitchen curtains.
Death, he confessed, was what he wanted,
but couldn't leave our mother
to take care of the trees.
Now my father writes me
of the rain-flattened grasses and sheep
grazing his orchard. He speaks of pruning
and the compost of windfalls and leaves.
This year he opened his gate to the gleaners.
They don't know that the ladder
he carries is the same one
my sisters and I stood under two decades ago
to catch the last of the black walnuts
or frosted plums, that fishing nets
and pie tins are remedies for crows.
When the apples spill from boxes,
it will be their daughters who must cut around the bruises.

Black Walnuts

The oil from the husks
has stained his hands black.
Stay away from the bucket, he tells her.
A part of her wants to touch
all that her father has touched,
for her hands to be as dark as his.
Father, she says, but can't find
the rest of her sentence.

She follows him to the orchard,
watches as he disappears on the ladder.
The leaves and branches tremble.
Then, there is a sound like rain,
paper being torn to the edges.
His sheep are black cutouts in the field.
She wishes she were among them.
They do not look up.
They are never afraid.

Blue Petunias

Meleah's blind grandmother grows petunias
along the stone fence. Their wilted petals remind
Meleah of dark bruises. If blue were a temperature
it would be cold, ice cubes in the tumbler,
tick-stubborn seeds pried
last summer from the watermelon's belly.
The old woman's eyes are paraffin cloudy.
True sight, she says, comes from a secret power,
Listen to the slugs nibbling the petunias.
Meleah helps sprinkle salt over the stippled bodies,
strike the match when they dry to leather.

At night, petals crumble to moth wings.
Meleah peers into the jars
of dragonflies and Monarchs, remembers
Grandmother's steady voice guiding the eyedropper
to bottle caps of sugar water, the ether
smell of cotton balls and the kerosene rag, burning.
Grandmother plunged it into the nested heart of a wasp.
For hours, she listens: voices caught
inside knotholes, Grandmother humming.
She rises, asks Grandmother to share two wishes:
a word for the sound of pins
being pushed through thick fabric,
to see tapwater on porcelain.

Starlight falls through the window.
Meleah remembers a game
with a blindfold, Mason jar and clothespins.
She came home to Grandmother
shaking seeds onto damp newspaper.
Now Grandmother dozes. Meleah reads
the book on magic cures, mummies and human combustion.
Grandmother calls levitation, ouija boards
and chain letters the handiwork of Satan.
Meleah reads the chapter on healing, crushes three petals,
then gestures wildly over Grandmother's body.
She remembers the man at the tent revival,
the hiss of snakes in his basket.
She holds a mirror to Grandmother's
mouth then her own. Both times the mirror is clouded.

Grandmother wakes, tells Meleah she dreamed
of fire-breathing horses.
They came to the fence to be petted.
Meleah lies beside Grandmother
and wishes to be blinded. Grandmother touches her eyelids.
The petunias on the nightstand start blurring.
How close, Meleah thinks, some of them are to wilting,
some to blooming.

Apricots

When the rains come
the apricots skins
will speckle like trout.
Find your way to an old orchard
and unlock the wooden gate.
Once inside, gather an apron-full,
enough to fill the blue clay bowl
your lover threw with his hands,
then left. Live for days on
boiled fruit. Its sweetness
will taste bitter. This is good.
When the words "grief" and "loss"
become important, study
the lightning mapping the hills
and the mud that finds its way
under your door. These are signs
that you will become strong.
If he returns, tell him
you are a goddess.
Show him the veins of the white trumpet flower.

Then read to yourself by lantern.

# My Grandmother Tells Her Story

## 1. Gypsies

In the old country
I saw them, their shawls
the color of fire.
They'd snap their babies' legs
like wishbones, then set them
to beg in the streets.
At night they stole our dogs and lard.
We found their handprints and said,
They're so dirty, they carry disease.
But once, in America I paid one to stroke my palm.
What she saw came true: Your grandfather,
the willow trees that circled the farm.
How could someone know my life that well?
Look at my hands all shrivelled,
the skin that hangs like gloves.
A gypsy looking into them now
would see only black rivers.
Why didn't she tell me cancer
would eat your grandfather's bones,
that two days after Christmas he'd die?,
half-eaten candy cane, his glasses and watch
handed to me in a sack.
If we'd told him, he would have begged for a gun.
What am I left with?
His woodshop, the refrigerator of old paint,
the picture of him in the coal mines
that a canary promised safe every morning.
Nothing is safe to lungs filling with black soot.
During the war, he sold tires,
out of pity loaned money to a stranger.
I had to sell my ring.
We rationed thin soup for weeks.
I would pay all my coins
to bring him to restorative waters,
to let the gypsies rub oil on his skin,
carry him to the Black Forest,
to his father, the violin maker,
the castle they lost in the invasion.
Did you know you were his favorite?

## 2. Village I Can't Find On A Map

There was a village, I can't remember its name.
Mulberry's grew along the river.
We fed the leaves to the silkworms
our father raised in the parlor.
At night I heard them munching,
tearing tiny holes.

Once, a lamb was lost in the hills.
I heard it bleating.
Its mother had fallen into a crevice
and had to be shot.
Then my mother died.
The villagers built her pine coffin.
When I saw her lying there in her wedding gown,
I thought, she is so beautiful,
and I wanted to kiss her.
Four candles, always burning.
We travelled steerage to America.
Every day the cook gave me a sip of vinegar,
a cure for dysentery.
One bunk over a stranger's
favored twin died,
her body wrapped in a burial cloth
and tossed like a giant fishhook into the ocean.
I stood a long time, watching.
When I die, sing Ave Maria
and the hungarian hymns
your great-grandfather sang on the boat,
in the boxcar of cottonseed
we slept in our first American night.
But don't bring flowers.
Flowers are for the living.
I've lived in so many places:
Texas, Nebraska, Wisconsin...even Alberta,
the muskeg frozen past spring,
a wagon fallen into the Athabasca
a mile from our homestead,
the ice frozen over like a suture.
When my uncle was dying,
he said, He's coming to get me,
he's coming to get me.
It was Satan. All those years
he had his way with my sisters.
Take these stories and know how fear
kept a fever in my throat.
When I cry now, it's for that lamb,
my sisters and rain.

3. The Burning Snake

After the river flooded
we heard a sound like a baby crying.
My father ran to the barn and we followed.
A snake was hypnotizing a chicken.
My father shot the snake, said the mate
would come looking. He built a fire
then held the snake over the flames with a pitchfork.
The sky was black, the snake, a giant streamer glowing.
After that, I wasn't afraid.

My father had given the night to his children.

4. Music on the Prairie

In Texas I heard angels' singing.
It was Christmas Eve and my family
had gone to midnight mass.
It was my year to stay home
and tend to the cooking.
I was alone on the prairie.
Where did that music come from?
A wild hen was cooking
and the dolls my father made
from corn cobs sat in a row
under the tree, listening.
On the porch, I lit dozen of candles,
and stood alone, happy in the blazing circle.

Soap

It is so white.
I let it slide over my body.
It curves a trail of rainwater,
a nightgown clinging to my skin.
If soap could hold my life
the way flour and water pasted
paperdolls when I was a child,
I would hoard bars of it in my closet,
forget the long walks on Sunday afternoon.

Admit those moments
when you hold a soap bar in your hands
and wonder at the life wavering
under water. Look, you say,
I have experienced too much.
It is then this bathing seems futile,
knowing no matter how clean
our lives will go on, doing whatever
they do best, for as long as they can.

Brooder Light

Summer afternoons
  my father killed the chickens,
    the hatchet gouging the wood.

The sweet blood smell drifted
  like white feathers
    through the rooms of our house.

When my mother called me
  I would go to her and my grandmothers--
    their thick-knuckled fingers working

knives through scalded bellies,
  splitting ribs, touching yellow eggs.
    Like women at a prayer meeting,

they spoke of Aunt Lizzy's palsy
  or the time Uncle Joe crushed
    a snake with a shovel,

then lifted it with a pitchfork
  to the fire, lighting the Texas night.
    Our family came together

after butchering to eat a good supper,
  to pray for health and offer
    thanks for the small things

that made our lives beautiful
  and matter.  We would repeat
    this cycle again.  Baby chicks

would arrive at the depot
  in boxes, and my father
    and I would ride there in silence,

his work gloves in my lap.
   He would keep the chicks
     under the brooder light for weeks,

let each of his children touch
   the yellow down, help scatter grain
     when they were moved to the pen.

There would be warm eggs
  to gather every morning
    and a full moon glowing

while we slept, its white light
  warming every window of our house.